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ABSTRACT

To develop positive speech patterns in disadvantaged students, the More Effective Schools Program in New York City instigated an experimental speech improvement program, K-6, in 20 of its elementary schools. Three typical speech-related problems of the disadvantaged--lack of school "know-how," inability to verbalize well, and the presence of poor speech patterns--provided the basis for the reeducative effort. Based on a presentation of sequentially developed lessons in listening, audibility, proper use of voice, specific sounds, phrasing, strong and weak verbs, asking questions, and making statements--the program's greatest success seemed to be in developing audibility and correcting withdrawn attitudes. Secondary goals for this program included (1) a respect and appreciation for the language of a child's own culture, (2) a receptivity to the language commonly used by the greater society, (3) increased ability to communicate with the greater society, and (4) improved self-esteem. (JM)

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TEACHING SPEECH IMPROVEMENT TO THE DISADVANTAGED

Rosa Lee Nash

IN a recent report Bernard E. Donovan, Superintendent of Schools of the City of New York, said:

> Language skills are a most essential ingredient of firm foundation for acquiring knowledge. Communication is the vehicle of learning. At the earliest possible stages, children must be taught to listen and speak, to read and write. Pride in speaking effectively must be highlighted in our schools if our children are to become competent, participating citizens in our American democracy."[1]

As teachers, guidance personnel, or parents we have all empathized with the youngster who has difficulty expressing himself and who has retreated into a world of silence. That silent, sullen Johnny in elementary school is likely to become the under-achiever in junior high school, the dropout in high school, and the failure in adulthood. He may never know the personal joys and material benefits of learning. Instead, he is likely to encounter deprivation, to generate hostility, and to react with antisocial behavior.

The realization that if given proper attention early enough in life, Johnny may be spared this tragic circumstance undoubtedly contributed to the Board of Education's decision to set up a special program for those children who had difficulties in learning. Known as the More Effective Schools Program and still in the experimental stage, this project was started in September, 1964, with ten schools and has now been expanded to twenty. Speech improvement and speech arts were important parts in the program.

Influenced by the anticipated effectiveness of the speech phase of the M.E.S. Program, the Bureau for Speech Improvement obtained federal funds for setting up additional programs in twenty other elementary schools and five junior high schools. According to Helen M. Donovan, Director of the Bureau, these programs also strive to develop an awareness of speech as an influence on self-image in the children in disadvantaged areas.[2]

Officially the program and procedure for M.E.S. speech teachers is summarized as follows:

> The Speech teacher in addition to using her time for the correction of serious defects should also focus on developing effective speech patterns for all pupils, working not only with individuals and small groups, but also as a teacher for the whole class.[3]

For all special programs, of which speech is one, provision is made for "the selection and use of today's best practices, and the invention and refinement of new practices created directly to meet the urgencies."[4]

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1 Bernard E. Donovan, "Focus on Fundamentals," *The Public Schools of New York City Staff Bulletin*, LV (October 4, 1965). Special Supplement.

2 Board of Education of the City of New York, The Bureau for Speech Improvement, "E.S.S.A. Title I F.A.S.I.," 4.

3 *Report of Joint Planning Committee for More Effective Schools to the Superintendent of Schools*, May 1964, p. 8.

4 *Ibid.*, 7.

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Speaking as an individual teacher, I shall briefly describe how through M.E.S. the Board attempts to help the disadvantaged pupils, a majority of whom are Negro, and how the speech teacher helps the child to learn to communicate more effectively. I shall offer some relative information with respect to the progress made in all twenty M.E.S. schools. With respect to Public School 100, Manhattan, to which I am assigned, I shall give some additional and more specific information about the program and my reactions to the types of problems which I encounter daily in my classroom.

Originally, each New York City public school had assigned to it a speech clinician (averaging one to one-and-a-half days per school per week), who worked with pupils who had the more serious speech defects. Through the M.E.S. Program, for the first time a full-time speech improvement teacher is assigned to a single school where she teaches as many classes on the several grade levels as her schedule permits. In each of the twenty schools the speech improvement teacher covers an average of twenty-one classes per week with 22 to 23 pupils per class or a maximum of 500 pupils, ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade.

To facilitate the efforts of teachers and administrators the M.E.S. Program makes provision for team teaching, smaller classes, heterogeneous grouping, flexible homogeneous regrouping, special study areas such as reading, and instruction in areas such as music, art, and speech. Innovation and experimentation in curriculum as well as creative use of personnel and school and plant organization are encouraged. Every effort is made to establish good community relations. Personnel of the highest caliber is sought.

In the over-all speech part of the M.E.S. Program, for the school year 1965-1966, test results indicated that the second highest percentage of improvement was shown in developing audibility, which was the most severe problem at the beginning of the school year. The second ranked problem, dialect, showed the third lowest percentage of improvement—indicating that the eliminating of dialect problems is more difficult to attain than improvement in audibility. The greatest improvement among all subjects was in correcting withdrawn attitudes. The least progress was shown in eliminating slow speaking rate and uncooperative attitude.[5]

Early in my assignment as an M.E.S. speech teacher[6] I was confronted with the severity of the negative self-image which the average Negro child has. One child expressed it by saying, to his classroom teacher: "Because you're a *blond* you must have a *wonderful* time all the time." The M.E.S. Program attempts "to deal realistically with those elements of living that make for a positive self-image. . . ."[7]

Among many Negro teachers there is a saying that Negro boys and girls simply seem to stop learning at about the third grade level. According to Kenneth B. Clark, a psychologist, "A key component of the deprivation which affects ghetto children is that generally their teachers do not expect them to learn."[8] The faith of the teacher, the

[5] Board of Education of the City of New York, Office of Educational Research, "The Speech Improvement Program of the Bureau of Speech Improvement in the More Effective Schools." Prepared by Linda Young (August 1966), 4, 5.

[6] By assignment out of the Bureau for Speech Improvement of The Board of Education of the City of New York, Dr. Helen M. Donovan, Director: at Public School 100, New York City, Borough of Manhattan, Mrs. Adele Timpson, Principal.

[7] *Report of Joint Planning Committee*, p. 1.

[8] Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 132.

quality of education he maintains, are two factors essential in determining failure or progress.[9] According to unpublished statistical reports in Public School 100, one of the first ten M.E.S. schools, pupils made at least one year and in some instances more than one year of progress in all areas during an eight month period.[10]

In one of my speech classes a first grader gleefully announced: "I told my mommy you're my speech teacher." But her expression of delight quickly faded when she went on to say that her mother wanted to know: "But what is speech?"

Speech can be defined in at least a dozen ways.[11] One of the more functional definitions for the elementary school program is speech ". . . as a form of human behavior. . . ."[12] To make this definition a living experience the speech improvement program ". . . must be both re-educational and developmental if it is to give the child the speech skills he will need to function effectively and to have those satisfactions which are every child's right."[13]

In the midst of my first lesson with a third grade class one youngster said: "How come I need an ole' speech teacher. Ain't I been talking all my life?" Without knowing it he verbalized the challenge which every speech improvement teacher must meet. He also made concrete the basic reason for the gross lack of speech awareness.

A speech improvement teacher may have several pupils in any one class who possess a variety of speech defects, such as, lisping, delayed speech, or stuttering. In a central Harlem school, in addition, she will have a majority of pupils with poor speech patterns which make verbal communication difficult.

Frank Riessman tells us that two prime characteristics of such children are their lack of developed ability to express themselves verbally and their lack of school know-how.[14] Very often each of these limitations reflects the same cultural lack of familiarity which the disadvantaged child experiences in relation to the greater society, and the former—the lack of ability to express himself verbally—is a major contributing cause to the latter—the lack of school know-how. For instance, as Riessman points out:

> Disadvantaged children are especially deficient in what might be called 'school know-how.' By this is meant the subtle expectations concerning various procedures in the school about which the average middleclass child usually learns, without realizing it, from his parents and general environment. By contrast, the deprived child frequently has not learned how to ask and answer questions, how to study, how to relate to the teacher, how to take tests. Frequently, he does not understand the meaning of phrases like "is to" (cat "is to" kitten as lion "is to" cub). These difficulties hamper the child tremendously in the school system. Teachers should not take this school know-how for granted, but rather should teach it explicitly.[15]

The majority of the children whom I teach have not learned to listen attentively, to verbalize adequately, or to follow verbal and written directions well; they fail to ask questions and often answer with bodily or vocal gestures.

A lack of school know-how, an inability to verbalize well, and the presence of poor speech patterns where there is ability to verbalize may appear

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 145-146.

[10] Mrs. Adele Timpson, Principal, Public School 100, New York City, Borough of Manhattan. The term "all areas" includes under its heading: Language, Reading, Spelling; Arithmetic, Computation and Problem Solving; Social Studies Skills.

[11] John F. Wilson and Carroll C. Arnold, *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1964), 7.

[12] *Toward Better Speech,* Curriculum Bulletin, 1952-53 Series, No. 5, 1963 Edition, Board of Education of the City of New York, 5.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[14] Frank Riessman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

to be three distinct speech or communication problems. In reality they are parts of a whole which might be characterized as the inadequate use of the English language as commonly spoken. According to one researcher in the field, Martin Deutsch, who is head of The Institute for Developmental Studies, deprived children have much more language than was formerly thought, for example, they ". . . seem to understand more language than they speak. . . ."[16]

The problem is one of communication. They use the same words quite differently: "Irving Taylor finds on word association tests that deprived children give responses that are often less conventional, more unusual, original and independent."[17] In addition their basic vocabulary consists of many different words which by some people are termed "slang" and by others "public language."[18] They are "poor in the use of verbs, but much better with descriptive adjectives," according to Deutsch.[19]

The speech teacher cannot, however, hope to re-educate the child in the effective use of English until both teacher and child have developed an appropriate respect for the language as used by the child and his forebears. For the Negro child this requires a knowledge of the history of his language, of its usage, o its limitations, as well as of the beauty of that language which contains considerable African "traces,"[20] so much so ". . . that some African words have crept into the American vocabulary."[21] "The Linguistic Atlas records that many words noted by Lorenzo D. Turner as of African origin have been incorporated into the vocabulary of Southern whites and spread throughout the Atlantic states and spread beyond the areas of the plantation system.[22] The Negro child should know, for example, that his first great poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, did for the language as used by the Negro what Robert Burns had done so well for the language as used by the Scots.[23]

To the extent that he has an appreciation for the language as presently used by his people, the Negro child becomes more receptive to learning the language as commonly used by the greater society. To the extent that he is then better able to communicate with the greater society, his self-esteem is likely to improve.

A program of speech improvement for children who live in a disadvantaged area must have as its foundation a cooperative, working relationship between the classroom teacher and the teacher of speech improvement. The speech improvement teacher must help the classroom teacher become communication centered rather than subject centered. The classroom teacher shares with the speech improvement teacher current curriculum about which speech lessons can be built. The speech improvement teacher presents a demonstration lesson lasting 45 minutes once a week. With their joint efforts they have as their goal to help children to build a bridge from their present lack of "expressibility" in terms of language, speech, and communication to a more skillful use of the spoken word. For

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.
17 *Ibid.*, p. 77 (Irving Taylor, former Project Coordinator for the Institute for Developmental Studies).
18 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
20 Gabrielle Grant, "A New Consideration of Some Influences of African Languages on the American Language," *Heritage Bulletin*, Nos. 15 and 16, Weeks of July 8 and July 15, 1965. Community Action Institute, HARYOU-ACT, Inc., New York City.
21 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.
22 *Ibid.*, p. 4. Lorenzo D. Turner, noted educator and linguist.
23 James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., 1958), p. 37.

these boys and girls it is not enough to acquire skill in pronunciation, enunciation, phrasing, stress, and proper intonation patterns. They must be helped to learn to formulate and handle their ideas well, to be selective in and learn to organize their ideas for oral reports and group discussion.

Lessons should be planned sequentially, building skill upon skill, starting with listening, followed by audibility and proper use of the voice; next there should be work upon specific sounds, both vowels and consonants, emphasis upon which will vary from the Puerto Rican pupil to the Oriental pupil, the Caucasian pupil, the Negro pupil. Finally practice should involve phrasing, strong and weak forms, asking questions, and making statements. All of this progress must be accomplished without losing sight of the principal goal to help the child communicate, haltingly at first if necessary, but with increasing effectiveness as he progresses. The long range goal is to enable him to express himself skillfully with freedom and spontaneity.

What specific tools do I use in teaching a speech lesson? My basic tool is the simple act of speaking and responding: every attempt at verbal communication is responded to. There are continuous dynamic currents of verbal communication between pupil and pupil as well as between pupil and teacher. As a teacher I also learn from my pupils. For example, from one fifth grade boy I learned in the following way: in putting the finishing touches on a verbal battle with another pupil he topped it off with a big four letter word loudly enough said to be heard all over the room. He accepted my admonition that "we don't use words like those in speech class," but fiercely rejected my follow-up remark: "besides, real grownups don't use words like those." "Oh, yes they do too!" he challenged. His spontaneous retort gave me the opportunity to say that I did not object to the word as much as I did to the fact that by using it he was not communicating anything. What had he really wanted to say, I inquired: was he angry, tired or hungry; had he wanted to be excused from class; or had he wanted to tell his antagonist: "why don't you shut your mouth?" If any of these were what he really wanted to say, why had he not done so? Besides if the adults who did use such words knew better words they would certainly use them.

This initial exchange between pupil and teacher blossomed into a lengthy classroom discussion of the need for an "ole" speech teacher in the first place.

To the basic tool of speaking and responding I add the use of phonetics, a rapidly expanding range of audio-visual aids, and a variety of basic subject matter through which the skills involved in the several speech group processes can be practiced. The use of puppets, creative dramatics, and role-playing help the pupil relate his everyday experiences to the speech situation in the classroom. For the pupil, I aim to make verbal self-expression appear not only possible but enjoyable, not only important but essential to his continued growth and development.

In this paper I have attempted to describe, briefly, the over-all M.E.S. Program and how, through its expanded speech improvement program, it is helping children to develop more effective speech which is calculated to encourage more creative learning. As a teacher of speech improvement, within it, I have highlighted the aims and goals of the program and how I attempt to implement them in the classroom.